

4th Sunday after Epiphany 29 January 2023

Matthew 5:1-12

St Peter's Lutheran Church, Elizabeth

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Grace and peace to you from God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

This morning's sermon is based on our Gospel reading – Matthew 5:1-12, where Jesus preaches what we've come to know as the "Beatitudes" in his *Sermon on the Mount*. Let's pray: ...

This morning, Saints, I'll focus on someone very precious. He features prominently in this sermon. He's my visual aid and most of what I'll say is directed to him, and through him to you. So, I hope you'll understand that this message is for everyone's benefit. And I hope you'll let your best wishes and prayers for him be also your best wishes and prayers for your neighbour and yourself.

Some of you already know him, but many of you may not. His name is Cillian Robert Dunne, the little chap whom God just baptised. He's 5 months old and today is the day of his baptism. What a beautiful and holy day it is indeed. Today, however, is not only about Cillian; it's also about you and me.

Cillian, although you're only 5 months old you're never too young to hear the Beatitudes for the first time, and neither are the rest of us too old to hear them again for the first time. Today you're being immersed in the Beatitudes to discover the true peace and freedom of Christian discipleship, as a way of being, and a blessing to receive. The Beatitudes describe the divine life, the life of Jesus, and the degree to which that life exists in this world depends largely on how closely we follow Jesus.

The Beatitudes aren't tasks to complete; rather, they're gifts of love bestowed on us to help us show others what God's kingdom looks like. As disciples of Jesus, we live with one foot in this world and one foot in God's kingdom – Luther's sinner-saint paradigm. This world rewards selfish, aggressive behaviour, but Jesus blesses the poor in spirit, those who mourn, and the meek.

In the Beatitudes, Jesus stands our world on its head. We believe in personal pride; Jesus blesses poverty of spirit. We seek pleasure; Jesus blesses those who mourn. We see the prosperity of aggressive people; Jesus blesses the meek. We love good food and drink; Jesus blesses those who hunger and thirst for righteousness.

Cillian, you are called to be poor in spirit. Standing before God, the poor in spirit know that they have nothing that God needs and nothing in their hearts that compels God to accept them. They bring their poverty, hoping for sustenance. They bring their brokenness, hoping for mending. They bring their sin, hoping to receive forgiveness. They bring their grief, hoping to be comforted. They bring their illness, hoping to be healed. Their poverty of spirit makes them fertile soil to receive God's blessing. "Blessed are the poor in spirit."

I also hope you never outgrow tears, Cillian, so that you can cry for others. You're called to mourn, grieve, and weep. Jesus did. In fact, the shortest sermon in the New Testament is: "Jesus wept" (John 11:35 NKJV). It's the way of a soft and compassionate heart, that lets us feel the hurt, pain, and needs of others. We grieve for the world as it is now but not for the world as it will be. Christians live under the promise that the kingdom will come and that God will make things right. God's faithful will be comforted in the future when God sets things right, but are also comforted now by God's promise of it. "Blessed are those who mourn."

Don't be afraid of meekness, Cillian. It's not the same as being weak. The meek don't take up all the space in a room. They're humble, neither making more nor less of themselves than they really are. They neither oppress nor dominate. They have a disposition of good will towards others. They're calm and incorruptible, and become a channel for God's strength and presence. You might be interested, Cillian, in the fact that this attribute is derived from the biblical Greek word, "praus". Sound familiar, Granddad? "Blessed are the meek."

Cillian, let your hunger and thirst be for doing what's right, for deep and meaningful relationships, for the well-being of others, for justice everywhere and for everyone. You'll have to make some difficult decisions. The smorgasbord of life will tempt you with things that look good but can't nourish, satisfy, or give you ultimate meaning. "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness."

You're to be merciful. God demonstrated mercy by loving us while we were still sinners (Romans 5:6-8). So, having received mercy, we can sympathise with those who need mercy. Being merciful is about being tender, gracious, gentle, kind, showing unconditional love and self-restraint. Having shown us mercy, Christ sends us into the world to keep mercy alive. "Blessed are the merciful."

Cillian, everyone here wants to see God and I bet you do too. When we let go of fear, anger, jealousy, resentment, comparison, animosity, competition, and judgement; when we cleanse our hearts and offer all that we are and all that we have; when we love as God has first loved us, we will see God. The pure heart is a lover's heart. "Blessed are the pure in heart."

While we're at it, Cillian, let's not add to the pain of the world. Let's not allow violence to creep into our thoughts, words, or actions. We follow Jesus, the Prince of Peace. Let he and he alone rule in your heart. The peace we all crave, starts within our own hearts and minds. "Blessed are the peacemakers."

There'll be times, Cillian, when you're called to step up and speak out, to rock the boat, to challenge the status quo. We need people to speak God's words and dream God's dreams when others have forgotten or denied them. You might feel lonely doing it but you're not alone. You stand with Jesus, the prophets before him, and saints like Polycarp of Smyrna, Joan of Arc, Dr. Martin Luther, Dr. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., and Archbishop Oscar Romero. "Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake ... revile you ... and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account."

I can't promise you much Cillian, but I can tell you this. You will wrestle and struggle with these Beatitudes every day of your life – not just to do them but to become them. Everyone here would tell you that too. They know the demands and the difficulties of living the Beatitudes.

Every one of us who commits to this way of life has experienced the struggles, the trials, and the wrestling. We've been tempted to follow a different path and some days we took that other way. We've heard the voices that say Christians are crazy, impractical, we make no sense, that we're old-fashioned and out of touch. We've felt the powers of this world push back: wealth, power, success, security, comfort, popularity, approval, what others say and think about us; and it would be easier to agree just to get along.

And yet, here we are. Here we are to do all in our power to support you in your life in Christ. Here we are, privileged to have immersed you in the waters of baptism and to be reminded of ours. Here we are to smell the fragrance of the Beatitudes. Here we are to renew our own baptismal vows and recommit ourselves to living the Beatitudes.

Here we are, Cillian, to stand with you as the saints of God in this God hungry world. Blessed are you who are baptised and believe; saints blessed to shine the light of God's kingdom truth and love in this world; blessed because God has promised for the sake of his Son, Jesus Christ, that you will be saved to eternal life with him. Amen.

And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will keep your hearts and your minds safe in Christ Jesus. Amen.